

Is Jesus' Proclamation our proclamation?
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The Roman Catholic Church and Evangelization

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I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to His Eminence, Cardinal Keeler and my esteemed ordination classmate, Ron Roberson for the kind invitation to speak with you this morning.

Sometimes small changes happen in our churches that become seeds for greater things to come. The year was 1967 and His Holiness, Pope Paul VI, changed the name of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. Little did we know then that Pope Paul VI had another agenda on his mind, the re-awakening of evangelization as the essential mission of the Church. A few years later, he invited the Church to reflect on why it exists.

In 1974, Pope Paul called for a Synod of Bishops on Evangelization in Rome. This Synod would focus on three questions: “1. In our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man’s conscience? 2. To what extent and in what way is that evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century? 3. What methods should be followed in order that the power of the Gospel may have its effect?”¹ These three questions have enabled the Church to re-awaken its essential mission and its reason to exist.

In responding to these questions, we begin to see the credibility of discipleship coming into play. Pope Paul says, that “Those who have received the Good News and who have been gathered by it into the community of salvation can and must communicate and spread it.”² Of course, for all who are parts of the Body of Christ, this is a link uniting us in a common mission yet presents challenges in its methodology.

In 1975, Pope Paul issued his *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi/Evangelization in the Modern World*. This document renewed the impetus of transforming the Church into a missionary community of faith. At the beginning of the *Apostolic Exhortation*, he makes it crystal clear lest anyone miss the point, and reminds all Catholics of the declaration at the end of the Synod on Evangelization: “We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church.”³ He expands on this in his *Apostolic Exhortation* by saying just in case someone missed the point, “It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.”⁴ If these words have any meaning for us as Roman Catholics, then we must continue to ask ourselves, why we do what we do. Why does this Catholic parish exist? Why does this Catholic school exist? Why does this Catholic hospital exist? And, of course, we may

ask ourselves why do I do what I do? I am sure the question has been asked by each of us in these challenging times. However, answering that question is probably the most important question we may ask ourselves and it is essential for us to meet the challenges of our times.

In the immediate years that followed *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, much discussion was going on with regard to evangelization. Many Catholics including bishops were not embracing the implications of what this document was calling us to. And, one often heard the remark from people in the pews, “I hope they do not expect us to do that protestant stuff.” At that time we were still very much dealing with a membership where many were still more comfortable in their vertical relationship with God rather than a horizontal relationship which Vatican II was calling us to. We were still wrestling with how to promote the Gospel within the Church let alone outside of it. Mission was perceived to be foreign mission and not mission at home. Yes, we as Roman Catholics had much to re-learn in our efforts to promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Many individuals were very appreciative of Pope Paul’s words and spoke of them openly and began to respond in concrete ways. Others were a bit more anxious about the implications, including bishops and others in leadership roles. However, there was not yet a plan for implementing this exhortation within the United States.

With the death of Pope Paul VI, one wondered if we would continue to have all this focus on evangelization. His successor, Pope John Paul I said in his only formal message to the world, “We wish to remind the entire Church that its first duty is that of evangelization...If all the sons and daughters of the Church would know how to be tireless missionaries of the Gospel, a new flowering of holiness and renewal would spring up.”

After a short tenure, Pope John Paul II said in his first message to the world, “One who follows the work of evangelization is not above all a professor. He is a messenger. He acts like one to whom a great mystery has been entrusted, and at the same time like one who has personally discovered the greatest treasure, like that hidden in a field in the parable of Matthew.”

The concept of reawakening evangelization in the Church was here to stay.

Beginning in 1983, Pope John Paul repeated calls for a “new evangelization” and insisted that it must not be new in its content. 1983 was the occasion of his visit to Santa Domingo and referred to the founding of “America.” In this context, he was quite clear that what he was asking for was not a re-evangelization since some of the old ways were not good but a “new” evangelization. The methodology of evangelization was not the best to say the least in the founding of America and in the long term did not meet its ultimate purpose. However, he went on to say, “Evangelization, however, can and should be new in its ardor, its methods, and its expression.”⁵

In 1992, without further delay, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops approved, *Go and Make Disciples, A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*. The bishops defined evangelization for the Church in the U.S. by saying, “...evangelizing means bringing the Good News of Jesus into every human situation and seeking to convert individual and society, by the divine power of the Gospel itself. Its essence is the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ and the response of a person in faith, both being the work of the Spirit of God.”⁶ In responding to the three questions that Pope Paul had put before the Synod on Evangelization,

the U.S. bishops focused on three goals in the national plan and strategy. “Goal I: To bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others. Goal II: To invite all people in the United States, whatever their social or cultural background, to hear the message of salvation in Jesus Christ so they may come to join us in the fullness of the Catholic faith. Goal III: To foster gospel values in our society, promoting the dignity of the human person, the importance of the family, and the common good of our society so that our nation may continue to be transformed by the saving power of Jesus Christ.”⁷ In simpler terms goal one is about enthusiasm, goal two is about invitation and goal three is about witness.

In the twenty-five years (1975-2000) since *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and later *Go and Make Disciples*, much of the effort of the Catholic Church in the United States was focused on renewal programs which used as their framework these two documents. Such programs as *RENEW* and *Disciples in Mission* and others were used widely by dioceses throughout the United States. The restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults was also a major focus during these twenty-five years. However, since 2000, I believe we have reached a new area in the focus on evangelization, discipleship. I believe that since 2000 we are hearing more about Christian identity and ongoing personal formation as disciples of Jesus Christ. I applaud this focus yet here lies another challenge for Catholics to think of themselves as disciples. When one thinks of a disciple we think “of whom” and “for what.” Therein lays the identity issue, disciple of Jesus Christ and a mission to invite others to transform the world with the Gospel. After all, the U.S. bishops even called their document; *Go and Make Disciples* not go and make more members.

This area of disciple identity is very much at the heart of the renewal of Catholic life among our young adults. They are searching for this personal identity with the Lord. Our youth are less interested in focusing on Church issues and happier working on social justice issues and serving in soup kitchens. Our young people are extremely open to discussing their personal encounters with the Lord and many of the previous generations. Not only is a personal encounter necessary for evangelization, but as Pope John Paul II said “everything planned in the church must have Christ and his Gospel as its starting point.”⁸

Today, our nation continues to become more secular and divided when it comes to religion. In some ways Europe is even more ahead of us in this area of secularization. However, Pope Paul VI addressed even this almost thirty-three years ago when he said, “This faith is nearly always today exposed to secularism, even to militant atheism. It is a faith exposed to trials and threats, and even more, a faith besieged and actively opposed. It runs the risk of perishing from suffocation or starvation if it is not fed and sustained each day. To evangelize must therefore very often be to give this necessary food and sustenance to the faith of believers, especially through a catechesis full of Gospel vitality and in a language suited to people and circumstances.”⁹

These are indeed challenging times and the response to Pope Paul VI is a reality check for us in this age of secularization. Our primary efforts in evangelization is to stop the hemorrhaging of membership as Paul VI cautions and join in efforts to in inviting people into the one Body of Christ.

Concerns & Suggestions:

- In my national and parochial ministry, I have concerns about local outreach efforts done in isolation from other faith communities in the area.
- In my experience as pastor, outreach to new neighbors and old alike was always done through an ecumenical lens. Parish greeting teams always handed out a card that welcomed people to the neighborhood. If they did not have a place of worship to attend, then information was provided on one side containing the schedule for services and programs in our parish. On the other side, it always said something like, “if you already have a place to worship God then we would like to share with you information on the houses of worship within our part of town.”
- Involvement in Councils of Churches and Interfaith organizations is crucial to our own identity and mission.

In conclusion, I repeat the three questions which Pope Paul VI asked thirty-three years ago: “1. In our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man’s conscience? 2. To what extent and in what way is that evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century? 3. What methods should be followed in order that the power of the Gospel may have its effect?”¹⁰

And, most importantly, how can we do this in concert with one another?

¹ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*/On Evangelization in the Modern World, (Vatican City, 1975) no.4. (Available through USCCB Publications, Washington, DC.)

² *Ibid.*, No. 13

³ Declaration of the Synod Fathers, (*L’Osservatore Romano*, October 27, 1974) p. 6

⁴ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*/On Evangelization in the Modern World, (Vatican City, 1975) no.14.

⁵“The Task of the Latin American Bishop”, Address to CELAM, March 9, 1983’ English translation in *Origins* 12 (March 24, 1983: No. 661.

⁶ Go and Make Disciples, A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States

⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 46, 53, 56.

⁸ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, (Vatican City, 1999) no. 67

⁹ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*/On Evangelization in the Modern World, (Vatican City, 1975) no. 54.

¹⁰ *Cf.*, no. 1